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William Charles McDaniel
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THE REPORT COMMITTEE FOR WILLIAM CHARLES McDANIEL
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Survival of the Black Church in difficult economic times:
A Case study

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Kevin D. Thomas

Jerome Williams

**Survival of the Black Church in difficult economic times:
A Case study**

BY

William Charles McDaniel, B.L.S.; M.B.A.

Report

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Abstract

Survival of the Black Church in difficult economic times:

A Case study

William Charles McDaniel, M.A.

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Supervisor: Kevin D. Thomas

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More U.S. adults are members of Historically Black Churches than the combined total of those connected to Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Buddhist, Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, and Hindu religious centers (Pew 2008). In addition to its considerable reach, Historically Black Churches have long been a pillar of the Black community. The impact of the Black Church is evident, not just in areas of religiosity, but firmly embedded in issues of economics and politics (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Frazer 1964; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Morris 1984). Given their prominent engagement in spiritual and secular matters, and vital positionality as cultural symbols of blackness, effective implementation and delivery of marketing communication is an imperative for African American Churches. The purpose of this case study is to examine the ways in which the tools of marketing communication can be utilized within the context of a down economy by Historically Black Churches as a means of promoting their symbolic value and advancing their spiritually and secularly-based agendas. (Thomas, 2012)

The average African American Church, regardless of denomination, has financial difficulty even during good economic conditions. However, during this recent recession, the African-American Church is facing huge challenges to survive. African-American houses of worship will need effective marketing and advertising plans to remain culturally relevant and compete for stable congregations.

This case study explores the importance of culture, tradition, ethnic foundations, and importance of Historically Black Churches in diverse communities. These elements, in conjunction with results from observations of a local community, and an input from a minister, used in the development of a marketing and advertising framework that can be employed by Historically Black Churches. The framework also incorporates successful and transferable marketing communication methodologies used by other non-profit organizations. However, the framework can be altered to accommodate warranted contextual factors.

Table of Contents

Questions of consideration.....	1
Will the African American church exist, in its present state in the next ten years? 2	
Why is the African American church's survival important?	3
Is the black church relevant to a new generation of congregants?	4
What do congregants want in their house of worship?	5
How will the African American church attract new members?	6
The marketing plan (Loving Shepherd, com, n.d.)	9
Executive Summary	9
Introduction	9
Goals	9
Benchmarks.....	10
Situation Analysis example.....	11
Marketing Recommendations and Marketing Mix	11
Implementation	12
Monitoring and Evaluation	12
Risks and Threats	13
Conclusions.....	14
Literature Review.....	15
Introduction.....	15
The Growth of the Black Church. Kevin D. Hendricks.....	15
Pentecostals, Politics, and the Black Church. Tanya Barrientos.	15
An Inner-City Catholic Church: Fighting for Relevance and Survival. David L. Gray.....	16
The Power of the gospel: Can black churches survive turbulent times? Elizabeth Stuart, Desert News.	17
In changing Neighborhoods, Black Churches Face Identity Crisis. Alessandra Ram.	18

State of the Black Church. Ruthie McDonald	18
Nine Denominations Launch Conference of National Black Churches. Washington Informer Staff	19
Will the Black Church survive the Same Sex Marriage Amendment? Don Allen of INBNN.....	20
Why do Inefficient Black Churches Survive? Dr. Brooks B. Robinson.....	20
References.....	22

QUESTIONS OF CONSIDERATION

- Will the African American church exist, in its present state in the next ten years?
- Why is the African American church's survival important?
- Is the black church relevant to a new generation of congregants?
- What do congregants want in their house of worship?
- How will the African American church attract new members?

The desired out-come of this case study, is to establish a basic marketing and advertising format for Historically Black Churches. Additionally, it aims to stimulate non-traditional thinking and use of marketing communication. Marketing and advertising are essential elements for running any business, and the church is no exception. The African-American Church is struggling for survival in a challenging economy, and differentiating their brand.

WILL THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH EXIST, IN ITS PRESENT STATE IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS?

In difficult economic times, charitable giving are the first items cut from a budget. This charitable giving would include houses of worship. In the case of African-American Churches, budget cuts have a more profound effect. The demographic of the black church, inherently, have financial challenges, and when there is ‘softness’ in the economy; those challenges are magnified exponentially.

According to Mike Breen of 3DM Blog, the church is declining as we know, but it will grow, “The diverse church will explode in growth over the next 10 years” Breen discusses the fact that people want a deeper meaning to their faith, attend places of worship with people that have similar interests, and connect with the extended family as well (Breen, 2012).

WHY IS THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH'S SURVIVAL IMPORTANT?

The creation and existence of the African-American, church has been the center point of black people. We care because of the preservation of history, culture, how we worship God and Jesus, and the growth and survival of educational institutions, many of which are losing students. In fact, the Civil rights Movement was organized and planned primarily by ministers of urban churches (Morris, 1984).

The African-American Church is even more important than ever, because black children do not know their rich heritage. Black history, born out of the church, needs nurturing and communicated to the next generation. African-American children are not receiving their history in the schools. What little African- American history black children know, or where they came from, is through a stereotypical lens manifested from society. Black parents are not compelled to pass on the heritage, and the diluted mockery of public school text books makes black .history endanger of obsolescence.

IS THE BLACK CHURCH RELEVANT TO A NEW GENERATION OF CONGREGANTS?

The strain of finances is one challenge, but connecting real benefits of faith to economic realities is a “sales pitch” of major proportions. Many young people, not just African-Americans, do not exercise their faith as a daily, living practice. The thought is church attendance is the right thing to do, but not always viewed as essential. This will widen a growing chasm between the new generation and the black church. This will become evident when more financial support for the church is expected.

With this in mind, the African-American Church will need an effective marketing communications plan, strategy, and tactics that can overcome the money resistance, and simultaneously sell the parishioners on a relevant brand of religion. The Black Church cannot rely on generational attendance and support; it has to assert itself as a viable option of a faith based organization.

I spoke with a young minister, and he says, “we have to change how we offer services to men; churches are competing with football on Sunday”. (Reggie Arline, Baptist Minister personal Communication, 2012). Many Protestant denominations could offer a Saturday service, similar to the Catholic Vigil Mass; this would accommodate some of the single men and women in their congregation. If the traditional service is the only option, a church will limit its growth and could have an adverse effect on attracting the younger audience. The first objective, when developing the marketing communication, is to get people to attend. A church has to be flexible, versatile, and open to new ideas to attract new members.

WHAT DO CONGREGANTS WANT IN THEIR HOUSE OF WORSHIP?

People really want to develop their faith, but they do not want a church that is not willing to meet their needs. Maybe the traditional service is not appealing, it does not spark excitement, it is not compelling, and the service is below their intellectual level or too high above their capacity to understand the messaging.

A congregation wants the positive, no constant reminding of their sins or what occurred on Saturday night. Churches must communicate the truth of the Gospel, but must be careful of its deliverance. There is major competition among churches and denominations; the battle is fierce.

People also want modern, mall-like churches with all of the electronic gadgetry. According to Mike Breen, 3DM Blog, the physical building of the church is important, but obviously the most expensive. The beautiful steeples and cathedral style of many churches may be antiquated. The houses of worship with their open, class adorned, and theater- styled spiritual institutions are the new “hook, with a less formal tone.


HOW WILL THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH ATTRACT NEW MEMBERS?


Its “word of mouth” that many churches depend on, “I heard St. James has an excellent choir (conversation with an attendee, St. James Missionary Baptist Church) or T.D. Jake’s Potter’s House preaches prosperity, but you cannot park in the parking lot with a less than perfect car” (Potter’s House, 2000). However, some forward thinking ministers have learned that you must offer more than choirs and preaching. African-American churches must offer community based services, such as, a job bank, resume services, day-care, youth groups, tutoring, counseling, and a food pantry. (St. James Missionary Baptist Church Web site, 2012).

In regards to attracting new members/customers, the secular marketers, specifically Daimler-Chrysler, is attempting to woo members of Mega-Churches to their vehicles.

DaimlerChrysler is finding redemption, and a new venue for showcasing its vehicles, in the African-American megachurch.

Four of the nation's largest black megachurches are breaking new ground in [marketing](#) and religion by hosting test drives of Chrysler vehicles. About 500 churchgoers have driven the new Dodge Aspen sport-utility and Chrysler Sebring and 300 sedans on ground that's not known for peddling big-ticket merchandise (McDonald, 2005).

Observers say that with the test drives, [Chrysler](#)  has overcome a centuries-old taboo on marketing goods for-profit in sacred spaces, and it has gained entry into black church circles less than four years after Chicago-area black pastors launched a boycott alleging the company discriminated against black customers.

Chrysler has achieved this de facto redemption in part by sponsoring singer Patti LaBelle's 14-city gospel concert tour, which includes partnerships with local churches with congregations that range from 3,000 to 27,000. With each [test drive](#) , Chrysler gives a free concert ticket and donates \$5 to the Abramson Cancer Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

The campaign helps Chrysler reach its target demographic more directly, said David Rooney, director of Chrysler brand marketing.

"We try to go out to our best prospects in their environment, where they're already engaged ... and in the African-American community, one of the opportunities is the church," Rooney says.

Twenty years ago, such an initiative would have been a non-starter because of black pastors' skeptical views of corporate America, said Tulane University sociologist Shayne Lee. But now, Chrysler is riding a shift in attitudes, especially in prosperous congregations, where Lee sees a commercialization of black religion."

Test drives at congregations are "just symbolic of greater changes taking place in the black church," Lee says. "The black church under [Martin Luther] King had sort of a prophetic response to corporate America, to raise challenges and attack systemic racism.

"Now we have this new black church that is very conservative, very bourgeois, telling people: `Hey, corporate America is your friend. God wants you to make money, so you need to know how this world works.'"

Chrysler isn't alone. For years, McDonald's and Coca-Cola have given free samples of new products at the 25,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Ga. Credit-card companies have offered free [financial](#) counseling seminars at black churches in Michigan and other states. Earlier this year, discount retailer Target won kudos from Christian Cultural Center (CCC) in Brooklyn by donating 2,000 backpacks for its outreach ministry to children in a nearby housing project.

"The churches don't have a problem with this relationship," said Chrysler's James Kenyon

For some, that seems to be true.

"They [at Chrysler] are giving money to a worthy cause" in their cancer donations, says Erik Burton, spokesman for New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, which is hosting test drives in December. "We are not parading cars through the sanctuary or having cars parked on stage. None of that's going to go on."

But not all churches involved in the Chrysler-sponsored concert tour have been so comfortable with the corporate coziness.

When Chrysler approached CCC in Brooklyn, for instance, the church refused to allow test drives on its property, directing them onto nearby city streets, according

to spokeswoman Theresa O'Neal. The church didn't want to feed an appearance of being "in it for the money," according to Senior Pastor A.R. Bernard.

CCC hosted the Chrysler-sponsored LaBelle concert in November and allowed the church to be mentioned in promotions for the test drives.

Bernard nonetheless welcomes certain relationships with business that present "an opportunity to work with corporations on our terms."

Social media sounds sacrilegious, but regarding the aspect of marketing a Christian church; it is now a necessity. This younger generation, and easily swayed portion of the population, is not paying enough attention to their faith, and promoting religion has dual duty to win them over. First, you have to convince them that their souls need to be saved by God, and second, the messaging have to be delivered in such a way that is genuine, but in a tone that connects with the culture. Also, the vehicle of communication has to be current and relevant: Facebook, twitter, music videos, etc. have observed on BET (Black Entertainment Television), Christian, hip-hop videos appear to be fashioned on the Generation X. The music is God centered, the clothes modern, and the dance moves are high-energy but measured.

THE MARKETING PLAN (LOVING SHEPHERD, COM, N.D.)

Executive Summary

This basic marketing plan will give way to a simple, straightforward, but effective roadmap in re-positioning Black churches to attract and maintain members. The plan is not meant to be absent of customizations and alterations, but can mesh each congregation's unique challenges and goals. A marketing plan, the use of sophisticated advertising tools, will be foreign to some of the older institutions of worship. However, the plans must be a regular mode of operations in order to maintain survival.

Introduction

Black Churches are businesses, any church for that matter, and all have to consider their relevancy and growth. The current economic climate does not consider saving souls, communicating the Gospel, and our Savior Jesus Christ. The focus is the bottom line and churches have to consider more the fiscal side of running a church-how do we pay the utilities, repairs, activities, running a school or daycare, and the Pastor's salary. The members pay for all of these items and parish or congregations are vulnerable when those members hold back on regular offerings.

Black Churches will need a plan that distributes a timely message and create modern atmosphere; it cannot be the same as the previous generation. The message has to touch the young, it has to use communication vehicles that make sense, and yes twitter, Facebook, and the cell phone.

Goals

The goals and objectives to be achieved involve, as mentioned, survival and maintaining relevancy among the faithful, Christian congregants.

1. Maintain the current congregation-curial numbers from dropping.
2. Attract young members-develop oriented programs/services that communicate to a new generation without aversion from the stalwart.
3. Distinguish the church as update, modern, “hip”, with their messaging and outreach, from similar houses of worship.

Benchmarks

1. First 90 days of plan-no reduction of members after launch of plan.
2. At least, a 10% increase in new members during 12 months after launch of the plan.
3. Implementation of new programs: Youth Service-Urban/Hip-Hop themed within 12 months of launch of plan

Situation Analysis example

	Positive	Negative
Internal	<u>Strengths</u> Current membership is Multi-generational.	<u>Weaknesses</u> Conflict among the church board.
External	<u>Opportunities</u> Demographics of immediate area is changing-new housing developments	<u>Threats</u> Similar congregations have begun launching their marketing plans.

Marketing Recommendations and Marketing Mix

1. Survey members to determine mode of communication used regularly
2. Develop key messaging: example, "Return to the Promise"
3. Introduce new message, new programs integrated with key message through events: Open house event, involve young members through modern dance, plays, and music-be inclusive.
4. Use weekly information distribution using communications that best suit congregations: E-mail, dynamic web-site, and face book. Measure usage

5. Create a Saturday afternoon young adult or youth -service-key message themed. Give incentives for young members inviting friends-I-pod, gift cards, etc.

Implementation

1. Form committee of diverse demographics from the membership.
2. Examine budget-discretionary funds, affordability, and necessity. Use as many volunteers as possible: stewardship, tax allowance for members providing resources. Actual expenditures form church budget not to exceed 20% of weekly collections.
3. Build presentation around key-message and benefits to the church.
4. Present the plan to largest attended service as part of sermon/homily- ex, 9:30 or 11:00 or mid-week service.
5. Release week of events and calendar following presentations.
6. First Youth Service/ Mass will be the following weekend including key message via popular music and dance (appropriate movements)

Monitoring and Evaluation

1. Evaluate the marketing plan by collecting attendance data at events that tie-in to the key message-Youth Service, presentations, etc.
2. New registration offered at every new event, and monitor increases.
3. Survey every 90 days, offer gift card incentives, such as Luby's gift card or similar.
4. Make any necessary adjustments, eliminate events, reduce frequency of events, or change approach.

Risks and Threats

1. The plan could be ignored by the current congregation; especially by the older members (lovingshepherd.com, pg. 7, n.d.)
2. Marketing plan flanked by competing church-duplicated or more dynamic.
3. Over budgeted and places church in a financial dilemma. (lovingshepherd.com, pg. 7, n.d.)
4. The plan is totally ineffective and does not increase membership, and the church's question of survival intensifies.

CONCLUSIONS

This marketing plan is simple, but could prove to be very effective if organized, and if there is united effort by the church. Institutions of worship will have grapple with this reality of “outreach” using secular methods in order to replenish a dwindling congregation. The churches cannot rest on the laurels of the past, what minister shouted the loudest, free churches dinners, the best choir, but the whole offering. Churches now have to be an entity of entirety: spiritual, political, sustenance, day care, health care, education, and financial services. (Robinson, 2011)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In progressing through this report, the subject of marketing the African American church is surprisingly prevalent. The various journals, reports, written accounts, on this subject, are testament to the importance of the survival of the Black Church. The information covers the span of six years, from 2005 through 2011; this period coincides with the height of the recession. This is the challenge, maintaining faith leadership as a house of worship during tumultuous, economic times.

The Growth of the Black Church. Kevin D. Hendricks.

This article gives discusses how attendance, among African and Caribbean church goers, is growing in the United Kingdom even though this ethnic group makes up only 6% of the population (Hendricks, 2006). Blacks make up 67% of the church going population, according to Hendricks, while houses of worship in London show declining numbers.

Christianity in Africa is big in terms of lots of people going to church, says Pastor Jonathan Oloyede, founder of Glory House that's grown from 45 members in 1992 to 3,000 today. Another factor is we have a strong, very vibrant ministry that is an outreach to the family and young families, so church is not just something you attend, its part of your life. Lessons learned from churches that obviously work.-

Pentecostals, Politics, and the Black Church. Tanya Barrientos.

Tanya Barrientos gives an excellent account of the correlation religion and marketing. This insight is through the eyes and experience of Anthea Butler, associate professor of religious studies in the School of Arts and Sciences at Vanderbilt University. As Dr. Butler is interviewed by Barrientos she makes her point concerning the selling of

religion, “But religion is all about sales,” she explains. “Everybody is selling something. They are selling some kind of God. If you understand what marketing is, it will help you understand a lot about religion”. This article and interview really covers how religion, specifically in the black church, how it is connected in the community politically, socially, and its overall relevancy.

Barrientos asks the question to Dr. Butler, “..... it looks as if there is a national discussion right now about whether the black church, as a social entity, is dying. Is it”? Dr. Butler answers with some interesting observations,

What started all this was an article Eddie Claude [chair of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton] wrote for The Huffington Post [asserting the black church is dead]. I think there is a core of a question there. It has never been a wholly unified ‘black church.’ There are too many religious traditions that make up the African-American community, especially here in Philadelphia. But the question becomes: Does the traditional way they have gotten social and political things done have the same amount of force as it once did? I think maybe not. I think it’s been fractured, especially on the state and national level, because the connections they had with black organizations like the NACCP or The Links and other black community organizations don’t exist in quite the same way anymore.

An Inner-City Catholic Church: Fighting for Relevance and Survival. David L. Gray.

One of the over looked issues in the African American Church is the plight of some black Catholics. This account discusses how two traditional parishes merged in the

late 1950s and serve a majority of Black Catholics in the Columbus, Ohio area (Gray, 2014). David Gray, points out that the “de-gentrification” has allowed the demographic make –up to be maintained of poor blacks. He examines how St. Dominic’s Parish serves the community residents with meals, but socially stratified on Sunday’s. Those that come to eat the free meals during the week do not attend the mass on Sunday. According to Gray’s conversation, with Father Joshua Wagner, it would be critical to the church’s survival is predicated on all being welcomed to become members of the parish. The needy coming to the church for the free meals must be invited, regardless of their appearance and socio-economic standing, must feel welcomed as Christ commanded his disciples (Gray, 2014).

**The Power of the gospel: Can black churches survive turbulent times?
Elizabeth Stuart, Desert News.**

I did not realize there were many blacks in Salt Lake City, Utah, let alone predominately African American Churches, thirty of them, according Elizabeth Stuart of the Desert news. The problem that these institutions of worship have is unique. The messaging is changing from the traditional ideal of family, and the heart of the family, to one of individual prosperity (Stuart, 2011). In addition, as with blacks across the country, economic suffering is disproportionately affecting the black churches in Salt Lake City (Stuart, 2011). With unemployment rising and black wealth declining, there is not enough enthusiasm for supporting the church. Also, Stuart examines the fact that the black church is not the social center any longer, because of desegregation, clubs, sports, etc. is now available other places.

In changing Neighborhoods, Black Churches Face Identity Crisis. Alessandra Ram.

Gentrification is happening in many areas of the United States, including areas of Washington D.C. It is a process insensitive process that makes room for the “haves” to have more economic growth, and the “have-nots” to move or get trampled. Many of the fortunate cannot afford the escalating property taxes due to the “McMansions” popping up in their communities; forcing them to sell.

This so called “progress” also affects the most important corner stone of the African-American spiritual, historical, and social institutions; the Black Church. (Ram, 2012)

Alessandra Ram gives us view of the cruel reality. In the nation's capital, black churches have refused to budge amid this accelerated gentrification process, even as they see their communities (and influence) slowly wane. For the first time, African Americans are no longer D.C.' Major. Select D.C. neighborhoods are experiencing a verifiable identity crisis, with the black church at the helm. Changing demographics are a daunting challenge for an institution that used to occupy an integral role in the community -- serving as the center of stability and camaraderie, offering potlucks and after-school care along with religious services. To understand this struggle is to understand the changing role of the black church in the American narrative, and what vulnerable communities stand to lose if it disappears.

State of the Black Church. Ruthie McDonald

Examining all the factors that contribute to the uncertainty, and changes of the black church, may not all be economic. Ruthie McDonald of Bella Online, tells us about the generational gap that is influencing the current condition of the black church,

“Perhaps we are looking at the difference in generations when it comes to the views of Americans. There is a fine distinction between the generation of those in the civil rights era, and the generation of today. However, one thing is certain: the Black church still has a voice, and is accountable for what is said. There is a higher authority to answer to. And that authority is God.”

McDonald also points out, that we need get back to placing God first and rediscovering that no matter the challenge we could always to our creator in heaven for solutions.

Nine Denominations Launch Conference of National Black Churches. Washington Informer Staff

It is refreshing to see that a collective effort is being made for African-American Churches to survive. In the winter of 2010, the Washington Informer on-line publication reports, that the largest African-American denominations came together, CNBC is its first annual consultation titled, "For the Healing of Our People," from Dec. 7 - 10, 2010 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. The gathering of faith and community leaders will address targeted social and economic issues, provide clergy and lay leaders training in public policy and honor African American leaders from both the private and public sectors. “

In reading this account, black people actually were a cohesive unit utilizing the commonality of their faith, numbers, and resources. This cohesion was a positive effort; not the reaction or pro-action of some violent event, but to address the challenges of the parishioners. (WFI, 2010)

Will the Black Church survive the Same Sex Marriage Amendment? Don Allen of INBNN

When we discuss the black church and all the factors that are causing the struggle, we automatically think of economic or generational message disparity, but same sex marriage does not come to mind. However, it has to be dealt with, and obviously is in direct conflict with Christian doctrine. Don Allen, the author discusses the issue in terms of not just a religious conflict, but political as well. According to Allen, there is no easy way out of dealing with something as sensitive as homosexuality. Allen accuses the Gay community as influencers of poor black churches being bought to advance their agenda. This could be a power and very toxic poison to the black church, and to an already fractured ethnic group that struggles for unity. (Allen, 2012)

Why do Inefficient Black Churches Survive? Dr. Brooks B. Robinson

Dr. Brooks Robinson takes not only a social, but an economic view of the black church in this paper. He goes through widely understood threats of differing generations, inflexibility of the ministerial messaging, but analyzes of the economics. Dr. Robinson relates the inefficient survival by comparing services that parishioners can receive at houses of worship or sought elsewhere. The services include, as he describes them: *Entertainment*-“worship in the Black Church is very much a show”, counseling Services-“This pseudo mental health service is

Called upon to help parishioners who are experiencing anxiety about life’s stresses”, *Social Club/Network*-“Clearly, Black churches, like most other regular meeting places, offer an

Opportunity to gather to meet, greets, and share experiences. This sharing of experiences entails

Transmittal of vital information about endless areas of life”, *Child Care Services*-“When parents with children are worshippers, they receive a service as an ancillary product of their worship”, *Tutorial/Education Services*-“Therefore, churches offer an excellent opportunity for youth and adults alike to practice reading; in certain cases with adults who do not read elsewhere, it is an important place for keeping reading skills sharp”,

Basic clinical healthcare services-“Black churches have begun to perform penitence by allowing public and private healthcare officials to visit their premises. They offer basic healthcare services, such as blood pressure screening, vision checking, diabetes counseling, and weight control counseling”. (Robinson, 2011). The conclusion from Dr. Robinson is that black churches survive from an economic perspective, because the aforementioned services are offered, competitively priced, compared to “non-church” institutions. Basically, I ascertain that parishioners, especially the wealthy, make this possible. However, Dr. Robinson points out that “cultural rigidity” also allows for this inefficient phenomenon-the mindset of blacks supporting their institutions. (Robinson, 2011).

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